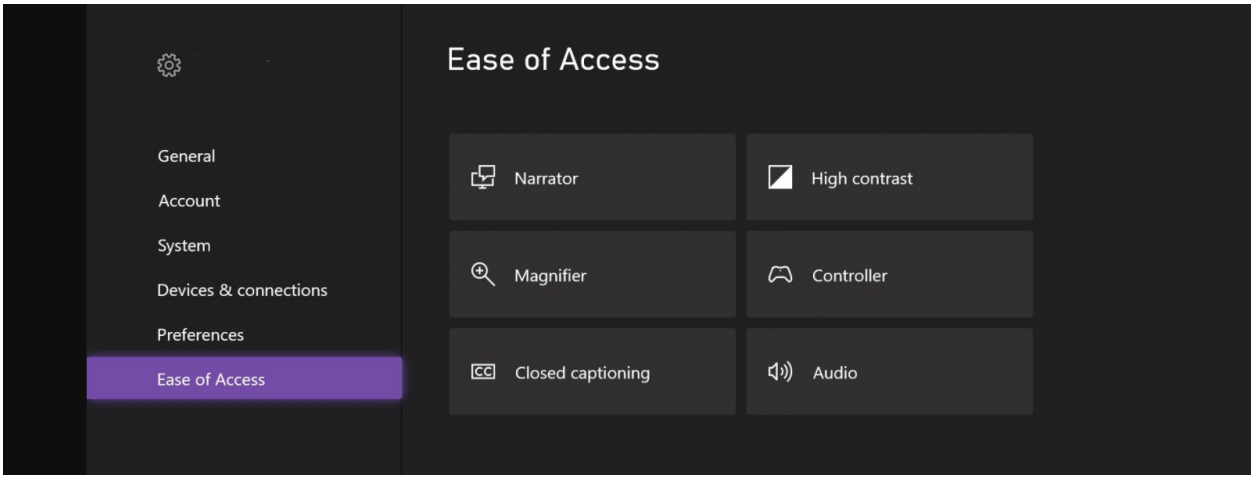

Irlen Syndrome – An Xbox Accessibility Journey

Community Stop Inn Jan 5, 2022

Written by Stop Inn.

For as long as I can remember I've found solace in the world's we are granted safe passage to through our gaming consoles. From an early age, and indeed one of my earliest gaming memories, it became second nature to flit between the exploration of the vast, winding labyrinths of Super Metroids' Planet Zebes and the accompanying 'big box' players guide in order to 100% this new challenge… and save the animals of course.

Through the next two subsequent console generations I proceeded in much a similar fashion, enhancing my adventures with the combined application of both in-game exploration and paper-based walk-throughs within, what was at the time, my new solace.

On an ordinary day, very much out of the blue, I found my calm and safe space disrupted. I discovered my placid out of game time, reading the strategy guides or walk-throughs, suddenly fell in total contrast to my in-game time which now brought with it intensely painful headaches and unpleasant visual disturbances along with an overwhelming feeling of intense stress.

Following a prolonged period of attempted self-management of my new condition, taking pain killers; closing the curtain and turning all the lights off; wearing polarised sunglasses whilst playing; etc. I found my journeys into other worlds restricted to fleeting 10-minute stints which didn't fulfil my gaming appetite nor justify the discomfort experienced.

At this point it seemed my self-management approach wasn't cutting it. Following a number of visits to my doctor I was referred to a specialist eye doctor who initially only confirmed that my eyes were perfectly healthy but acknowledged that there was clearly an underlying and as yet undiagnosed issue present.

I mentioned that as part of my self-management of the condition I'd found that wearing polarised sunglasses helped alleviate the symptoms slightly. That was the moment that a small comment morphed into a big solution. In the weeks that followed it was concluded that I was suffering from Irlen Syndrome (also referred to at times as Meares-Irlen Syndrome and Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome), a non- remediable condition which in fact isn't actually an eye problem at all but instead a perceptual processing disorder and is essentially a problem with my brain and its ability to process visual information. The treatment for this condition involves experimentation with the application of various coloured lenses in order to find the right tint or shade which works best for an individual and their symptoms.

After finding my shade, a very dark blue, I felt it was high time I got back to my long overdue digital adventuring, or so I thought.

Shadow of Mordor was the ammo and a Sunset Overdrive, white special edition Xbox One was my weapon of choice. I was so ready. A new console and a working solution to my real-world problem that had been impacting for far too long on my other worldly adventures.

Then, despite my glasses, the Xbox dashboard suddenly became an unexpected enemy. It's tiles, colours, icons, fonts, labels, and menus became a warren of discomfort, bringing with them a wave of visual stress, nausea and confusion. I'm not sure why it breached my defences, nor am I entirely done with theorising even as I'm writing this, although I'll revisit this again before the end of the piece as I do have some thoughts.

Following some research and some assistance in navigating the Xbox menus I once again found solace in the accessibility setting of the Xbox One, the majority of which are courtesy of a gentleman named Bryce Johnson, co-inventor of the Xbox Adaptive Controller and who, at the time, was responsible for the implementation of my two Xbox accessibility saviours, high contrast mode and magnifier.

With high contrast mode and magnifier activated my dashboard experience was transformed from nightmare to dream… the extra-fluffy cloud type with unicorns and sprinkles.

It seems so simple but at the time it was exactly what I needed and I'm so grateful that Xbox had people dedicated to making accessibility a genuine priority.

Fast forward to present day and as a Series X owner I’m pleased to say that from an accessibility standpoint Xbox is still positively assisting my journeys and adventures with even more accessibility features that contribute towards my enjoyment and overall experience.

For example, I now have a blue light filter, a component of the night mode feature, within the accessibility settings, the difference this makes and the additional playtime it delivers is unbelievable and incredibly valuable to me.

I mentioned earlier in this piece that I had some thoughts on why my initial Xbox One dashboard experience, before applying some accessibility settings, might have been a negative one, and now, with context as an Xbox Series X owner, I think the switch from HDMI 2.0 to HDMI 2.1 and the FPS gains that delivers might actually be the one thing that, accessibility settings aside, purely form a hardware standpoint, may have made a real difference. I don’t know for sure but even with high contrast mode turned off on the Series X my experience isn’t too bad.

Arriving at my personal accessibility plateau has taken the best part of a decade. I have hope that within these thousand words people will find inspiration and a realisation that most things can improve when given the time, tools and attention required. I’m incredibly thankful for the Xbox accessibility features and support we have at our disposal, without them I’ve no doubt there would be countless journeys and adventures that could simply never happen. A ‘Start’ that was never pressed.

I’m proud to have the opportunity to help others in the Xbox community as an Xbox Ambassador. I sincerely hope that in sharing my experience it encourages others to continue the conversation about accessibility in all forms in order to highlight just how much we can achieve with just a little help from each other.

Stop Inn, Level 3 Xbox Ambassador, Xbox Insider (Alpha Skip-Ahead) and Project xCloud Founding Member